

24 December 2012

Well Happy Christmas for those who've noticed it's Christmas. It would be dishonest to say I'm one of them, but in truth I have the excuse of it not actually being Christmas here. Not until 7th January. The main celebrations over here are taken up with New Year with the Orthodox festival known as Christmas remaining a religious commitment for most of that faith. I suppose that rules me out of overly indulging in either Christmas but I will appreciate the day off in a few weeks' time, and extend my warm wishes to most of you west of Warsaw choosing to celebrate tomorrow in the way you always have. The only thing I will bother to do on the 25th is eat mashed potatoes. Last year I didn't, I suspect for the first time since the 1973 event when I was but a week old.

A more meaningful celebration ought to be the continuation of the world, ought it not? I never quite fell for the doom merchant's end times scenario, but remain with my eyebrows a little higher than usual that (so far) nothing bigger than the Olympics happened this year. Pretty big though they were.

From my own side, I have been pleased to discover Horatio Alger novels and to improve my dombra playing forgivably. But this very week has seen a nice 2012 moment arrive in parcel from England, thanks to mum and Mr P, in the form of a Q Link pendant. SRT 3 variety.



[Here](#)

Now I expect to most people this will seem odd-ball, but there does seem to have been a lot of scientific research gone into these products, and a lot of acclaim has come from a range of different people none of which are of the tree-hugging variety. I can only add to the hype (if you can call it hype). Since wearing mine I have felt better. And it has only been a few hours. My intelligence will be insulted should anybody suggest it is psychological thing. I usually think this is just something somebody says when they are not brave enough to consider a new way of thinking. If anybody is at all interested in what the website says, you now learn that I fully concur. The evidence that I am sitting by my PC with no discomfort in my solar plexus region is already quite enough proof for me.

I joined a new gym, again, but this time not one of the multi-function offer-all places. I spent two years with one of them and liked it very much, but it was difficult to escape the conclusion that I was paying a lot for nothing given that I was only using about 15% of the available services. Weights. The new place is a small affair and only a few minutes from my house. I may need a new programme for some muscle groups but by and large the 60% reduction in what I have to pay, and the fact I can pay monthly is ample justification for making the change. I have already asked the gym to buy some heavier weights though :) as their maximum size is not heavy enough for me. Made me feel very good, that one.

Part of the benefit of not having to spend 90,000 Tenge today is that I can buy a heart rate monitor. I do admittedly have a little improving to do in certain ways and something like this, although probably directly useless, will motivate me to do something. It would be nice to get one of the Garmin variety which also track you via satellite and record your distance etc etc but I suppose there's not enough need. The basic gadget will act as motivation enough. This doesn't mean I won't learn how to use it, but don't be mistaken, the main reason for buying it will be to add incentives to the desire I have to improve my fitness a little.

And of course the Q Link is said to improve energy levels :)

The problem though is that there is not much possibility to go running at the moment, with most of the pavements well out of service and the roads either dangerous or rivers of slush. I think there is a stadium down in town, in fact I know there is, where we can run, but it's out of the way. The plan would be to drop my gym shoes in the gym under the sofa and run up the road for half an hour. Kind of a warm up. But the last gym, six months ago, came with a promise to self to run back up along the river every training session and time myself, something I did twice. Luckily the time improved considerably. I need numbers and targets to stay interested. I think this failure was a one-off.

The My Destination website is growing, with more new restaurants and cafes etc on the site all the time. But the TV show has finished for the time being, as the broadcasting channel has decided, well, something. We hope they will re-continue in the near future. So for my four-month spell as a TV presenter, thumbs up, it was fun and hopefully not the end.

For now, check out these photos of Shymbulak :)

29 November 2012

Not had any orders for a few days, the work hasn't dried up but an unprecedented respite gives me chance to decorate a few pixels here again as I admittedly put off something else somebody asked me to do.

This bloke

Is a relatively well-known local singer with an operatic voice generally lent to more mainstream songs. Having made his acquaintance he saw my early songs and asked me to write one for him. I did, although it's not finished yet. But more to the point, he asked me to translate an Italian song into Kazakh for him, Andrea Bocelli's Canto della Terra. Then a few more, which I haven't even started. My Way, sung by Frank Sinatra, and The Phantom of the Opera, sung by somebody other than Frank Sinatra. The easy part was over when I did Canto della Terra because the lyrics did not demand rhyme, only syllable rhythm. The next few, certainly My Way, require full coordination across the art of lyric writing. I suppose that's why I haven't started yet.

I gave my first song to my dombra teacher who said she knows somebody who can put it to music. I'm waiting for the results but in the same way I can write a restaurant profile I imagine a composer can write a simple melody. The problem would be his writing it too high for my very monotone voice, or too low. I asked for something simple because at my level that's what I can manage, but the idea is not to become another Sting (luckily) or another Son Pascal



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But just to show my appreciation for Kazakh folk music and the language. I don't know how seriously people will take it, but the person who is interested in promoting me is the person who got Son Pascal started. Then there are other people who I imagine would be happy to back me, although as yet none of them have heard how bad my voice is.

Should be skiing season soon, snow having fallen early as the photos below show, although in the city it's melting by now, which is good. It's not been so cold either. You tend to leave the winter coat for winter, as wearing it in Autumn really doesn't leave any more layers to add when it does get cold. People here though wrap up warm from the end of summer, kids out in hats come September and little elicits more spontaneous reaction from a stranger than not having one on yourself. Especially if you've no hair :) I suppose the average winter temperatures here are about -8°C although this does mean that we can drop plenty lower if we feel like it. Astana on the other hand can get as low as -50°C plus wind chill which sadly does fur coat sales good, but given the necessity I suppose it's eminently more justifiable than worn as a fashion statement. Doesn't mean I like it, but it's barely worse than Siberian reindeer herders using it.

Tired, back to my Horatio Alger novel. This one is called Five Hundred Dollars and has a slightly different theme to it in that the main protagonist is not a boy. It is about a long lost and ageing uncle who comes back pretending to be poor to test the attitude and intentions of his family. One side are stone broke and hungry yet still offer him a home with food, and the other side disown him and kick him out because he 'confesses' to having but five hundred dollars to his name. I think you know what happens next... Welcome to the world of Alger Jr.

28 November 2012

It's strange how things come back round. I accidentally dumped a load of old music on my phone (I retrieved the higher capacity SD card from the Acer Pad before I sold it) and played some of it back. These days I hardly ever listen to



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because there's too much old energy stored up in it for me. I suppose it reminds me of how old I am, without actually being all that old to speak of. Then there's an Italian duet called Paola and Chiara who I used to like in spite of not knowing why, so much. Trashy pop music has its place I suppose, and as I always tell myself when I go shopping, a truly holistic perspective on life never loses sight of the superficial. War of the Worlds might get a listen sometime, but not until the current phase passes, that of the rediscovered Wirral magicians.



[here](#)

I hope you read at least as much as the introduction there, for further justice I do not then need do them. But there's a newish album out which I hope to acquire somehow, the critics claiming that it is one of their best efforts ever. I sneaked a listen via Youtube, it was good indeed. What makes them so good however is not necessarily the fact that they have credible tunes, as they put it. It's the absolute genius of the lyrics.

Nigel Blackwell is (although I'm pained to indulge in lexical repetition here) a genius. His views on society do more than merely hold a mirror up, they bop us on the nose with it. There are no stupid love songs. The few such songs I know of are dressed up in such irony that they barely resemble songs of anywhere near that nature. Mathematically Safe is my personal favourite, a cunning play on the expression used to describe a team no longer threatened with relegation in turn used to express undying love for a given female.

Here are some of their song titles, quite readily putting them on their own very unique shelf:

Gubba Lookalikes (Tony Gubba was a BBC sports reporter)
Tending the Wrong Grave for 23 Years
Shit Arm, Bad Tattoo
My Baby Got the Yipps
If I Had Possession Over Pancake Day
Thy Damnation Slumbereth Not
99% of Gargoyles Look Like Bob Todd
Lord Hereford's Knob
Bad Losers on Yahoo Chess

and the most pissed off

National Shite Day!

HMHB is more than music. It's comedy, an ironic protest against the hum-drumness of life, an antidote to the pursuit of perfection that makes us all so imperfect. Musically, perhaps not your cup of tea, but if you're familiar with British life and can relate to the perspectives of the working class male, probably football fan and real ale drinker, then how can this band not be a part of at least some of your life?

So that accounted for yesterday evening's reason not to write anything. I also played the dombra for a few hours in preparation for the odd performance coming up. More to follow... The idea of getting myself together for a novel is gathering pace with a more definite idea of what it'll be about. I may preview some of it on the site but, naturally, not until I write it.

A lot of the inspiration recently has come from an author not quite of the standing of Peter Ardern but one who wrote some 150 dime novels during his lifetime at the end of the 19th Century. Horatio Alger Jr is not a widely known author, partly accounting for the fact that his books are free on Kindle



[Here](#)

Incidentally the reason I first discovered him. The same as with my very favourite book EVER



[Here](#)

which, speaking as a writer with a massive ego, I can say is so well written it puts me to shame. Free books are always worth a sneak look at, so quite at random I downloaded books by each of the above and read. If you check out the Martin Pippin link you will likely find my customer review down the page so I will spare you another one. Horatio Alger however deserves a paragraph to himself here in that he is by far the person I have read most, and excepting Ardern and Farjeon, the person whose works I have liked best.

Most of his novels have the same basic story, the rags to riches tale of a teenage boy who along the way refuses to do anything dishonest, meets somebody who wants to get in his way and sometimes somebody who tries to cheat him (often with success). Yet these boys, orphans maybe or runaways, are intelligent and resourceful, not to mention a touch lucky in places. You know, they are down to their last cent when they see an elderly man fall on the ice, help him up for the latter to like the cut of their jib... turns out they are loaded, get the lad a job on a higher salary than most boys his age and in the end bequeath the entire half a million estate to him. I am reading another one now (one of about 70 I have) and I know what's going to happen. But it's OK, you just want to be there when it does.

Predictability spoils most books. Alger novels seem to be above this.

I originally started reading to get ideas, general, and for how to sustain dialogue. Oh, and to get a better idea of something my sister once said that I never understood. To know who I'm talking to. Still don't get it. But this notwithstanding, I know I can write a decent story (called Silk Road) now and have the likes of Eleanor Farjeon and Horatio Alger to thank for this. So although each of them is very much past tense, in some ways the lottery of the Kindle free book selection has rendered them far from a finished story. Whatever the truth of the higher dimensions may be, you know, Angels and spirit guides, I would be only too honoured for them to take part in writing another book together with me.

OK, I spilt some beans, Silk Road. That and these sites due my loving attention quite presently:



[Here](#)



[and here](#)

Oh, and I have some work to do on my own site.

23 November 2012

Most of the time the creative juices are siphoned into other ventures these days, leaving little for blogg-ging which as irregular readers have noted has resulted in the absolute dearth of anything going onto this page. Yet recently have I resolved to resolve the situation by making a little more effort to document my worldly thoughts and feelings somehow, starting with the following ramblings about other writing, the weather, and my progress in the world of showbiz.

I might add, some of my more recent work has included this, a profile of the best café in the world.



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The amusing irony is, they have paid for a standard profile and although by definition they receive fewer multimedia options than those dipping deeper into their pockets, the latter may be a little miffed to read the glowing tribute paid in this case, some many hundred words longer than they got themselves. Fact is, Biskvit Café is the best, and even if they only dish out enough dosh for a simple single page entry on the website, they still receive my innermost loving care.

Every word of it true. The profile I wrote for another place I refuse to name is a great work of fiction but if I were to write the truth I would not only lose my job but any chance of finding other work locally, given the amount of obscenities entered therein. Every word also true.

As regards my own site, I've scanned the pages and found plenty of obsolete stuff much of which I have already disposed of. I plan to rehaul a lot of the content over the coming comings so stand by for a lot of email updates which I imagine many people will delete. In any case, it's time for reconstruction across a lot of the site, including a new home page which if you click on HOME you will see I have still not got round to doing. I know nobody reads anyway so I am persuaded of the absence of any much hurry.

Winter has come a little early. Good it may be for skiing, but for walking round town...? I wish they'd grit a bit, they do the main roads admirably but the pavements look set to require some coordinate navigation for five or so months now. I have some neat traction soles but the straps don't do decent shoes much of a favour. The snow fell constantly for a few days earlier in the week, vindicating the weather forecasts which incidentally are almost always accurate here.

On walkways and some roads the snow very quickly packs into ice and thawing takes more than a quick rise of temperatures over the zero. I was taught at school that ice melts at over 0°C but behold, it does not always conform, if conformation to an arbitrary law of nature is possible. We were also taught that water evaporates at 100°C while during experiments in the same lesson steam was clouding off at as low as 45°C. Evaporation, no less. (Incidentally, my science teacher is one of the teachers I look to as a role model for my own teaching... when I think about what not to do if I want my students to learn, that is.)

Music school is a new addition to my week, although I'm not exactly a member, I just go for private lessons in the centre. My teacher seems pleased with me, and I can see she will be of value in return. I don't know if I ever blogged about my song-writing. I wrote some Kazakh poems and got them moderately edited for clarity. I originally passed one to this guy



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With a suggestion in return that he'd sing it, although it seems unlikely now. So with the blessing of a few, including the music teacher, I could well sing them myself. Watch this space.

TV is going well, tomorrow seeing the 14th episode recorded. I am hoping they will extend the series beyond December but they have not decided. I suppose if it does become a one off I can look on it as a great experience but I would like it to be an open door rather than an open and shut one, and if I might say so myself I am not bad in front of a camera. Local people may view the programme, Popular English, on the Bilim Channel available via ID Net TV. Those outside Kazakhstan may find it somewhere, but I don't know where.



[Here](#)

I need a tennis coach, having reminded myself of how I am lousy with a racket. Not too bad with a camera, but for hitting balls over a net, point and press is a particularly inadequate policy.

And finally, those of you reading locally might not know about this festival, if we can call it a festival. Tous au Restaurant is a venture aimed at introducing decent fodder to the people of Almaty for a very special deal. The only jot I care about it myself is that I am lucky enough to be the bloke who writes it up



[Here](#)

but for some of you, it could make for a special night out sometime.

18 October 2012

Part of the reason for the huge delay in getting to the blogge has been the backlog of things that may not have needed saying but would I suppose have laid claim, rightly so, to a few pixels in the immediate vicinity of where your gaze lies right now. Being a blogger, albeit an increasingly elsewhere one, does leave you with the notion that you have to report things even retrospectively. The sheer volume of news over the past few months has made a session by the knackered old PC seem utterly daunting as I've procrastinated to the point of, well, having to concede that I can just not now be arsed to put it all in writing.

So here we are, starting a fresh and this with the news that today, one of my articles for



<http://www.mydestination.com/kazakhstan>

was published heavily edited. I was not a happy bunnsworth (type of rabbit) and emailed the holding company to protest. The odd word, OK, I am not perfect and even afflicted with a shocking case of writer's ego can accept that a second pair of eyes could find the occasional crease in my shirts. But to change half (and not even for the better, I add)!?

Apparently, what had happened was that as usual the company offered my boss editing as standard, something usually rejected, to be accepted via a misunderstanding. They then set about, wait for it, checking my grammar and stylising my work to make it more readable. Well, to cut a short story very long, my usual protracted sentences had been tamed for the benefit of non-native readers. I suppose I can see where they were coming from. We left it with me agreeing to tone down the expressive endless clauses and them to get back to us if they felt things needed to change, allowing me to make the changes myself. My grammar was perfect, may I say?

I remarked that I felt like a painter in attendance at his own exhibition where 50% of the paintings had been replaced with something that better matched the walls. I depend to a degree on this venture for a professional portfolio. I do not object to a centralised set of standards but where they take control of my work I lose interest. I see no reason to write for anybody or anything in fear that my prose will be taken to pieces at the other end.

Anyway, the website is now very much established and with the exception of the home page, which was commissioned before they met me and the review of the Fryday Group, A Meeting of Proactive Minds, as just described, the writing is either all mine or at least subject to my own editing.

I was offered work translating a tourist guide to Almaty and agreed to do it for \$200. It was a big enough job but not something I fancied, the old Anglo-Russian dictionary falling to pieces and me worrying about my blogge laying idle. But I got to it, did a page to be told that I should not start until they gave the go ahead. It was nice when they didn't, I mean it might not make great business sense but I can be very lazy when I feel like it and the absence of work permitted more time for dombra practice and reading Horatio Alger novels (of which I have about 60 on the Kindle). Today I learned that a local agency translated it and they want me to edit. The price now has dropped from \$200 but actually not by a lot, and I am delighted with the new deal. For those of you not

in Almaty but thinking of visiting, I will try to secure a copy for you when finished. If I don't, I may just email you my version, albeit without pictures.

I should be bigger. I don't mean that as a near 40-year old I am expecting to be fat. It's just that 18 months in the gym, I should be bigger. Need to work harder, too many junk sessions. It is true what they say, pardon me the cliché, but no pain no gain. With weight training for muscle this is irrefutable. The ONLY way to make the muscle tissue grow is to push it beyond the usual limit on which it responds by extending its capacity, not normally possible unless it grows. The limit for normal use is represented by the point at which exertion begins, to go past this means pain. I spend too many sessions ducking the challenge, lifting five times because ten hurts too much. Not any more, I'm amazed I'm still going, having chucked in the gym towel many times in my life before, and enjoying it, motivated and pretty regular. Just that extra mile.

TV going well, we've made eight episodes and more are planned, although I haven't heard back from the satellite channel about working for them and nothing more came on local TV, but it's OK, I suppose I have loftier ambitions now. A recent discovery included a talent for writing Kazakh poetry. Admittedly they are proof read and altered a little, but the four so far have been given to famous singers, including

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[this lad](#)

who I hope will sing one of them, inevitably making it a hit. I am toying with the idea of singing new ones myself, since I can play the dombra and do my own lyrics, I imagine if I can hold a note it might be suitably impressive to locals. I have heard some music in the style I want to sing in and to be honest, a lot of those blokes can't really sing anyway. Nomadic music was probably not fully melodic, the ears of today are attuned to different sounds and the contrast between the two is evident. I shall aim for the bygone styles but hopefully not out of disrespect for those contemporary. Perhaps not just yet, need to familiarise myself with the genre first and as I can't name a single artist thereof it makes getting advice quite difficult.

13 August 2012

There's something about teaching that multiplies the effect of the hours, in that perhaps we don't work more hours than other people but tend to need the break more. Perhaps we just can't last the pace. In any case, taking advantage of the chance I have to take a full month (unpaid) off, and the bonus of there being a new visa free regime in Kyrgyzstan, I finally made it over to Lake Issyk Kul and spent five nights there in a really nice little place called The Castle Hotel.



[Issyk Kul](#)



[The Castle Hotel](#)

Yet there were also visitors from further afield, a man from The UAE, as well as his partner, from Bishkek. But most interestingly were three teams of lads en route to Ulan Bataar, firstly about eight Italians in Fiat Pandas. Then next night four British lads who had a giant bulldog on the top of the car, followed by some Australians who spoke to me at length about how nice Iranians are. That's what everybody says.

They were taking part in the traditional UK to Mongolia rally. This is not a race, it is simply a charity drive across, well, a long way which sees them take in about 15 (a guess) countries. Most of them reported similar experiences of similar places... paying the police on the side in one country (not Kazakhstan), not being able to find a cash point in another (definitely not Kazakhstan), loving the people in one and being glad to get out of another (not Kazakhstan). Most of them were places I have never been, so I couldn't comment. But I did get the impression that for most of the, a night in Almaty might be very interesting.

The benefit of my trip was to get a break, some fresh air and a chance to see the lake I have thus far always

avoided talking about, not having been there until now. That, for somebody who lived in Bishkek for a year, was inexcusable. I won't say the parts I saw were paradise, a little tatty and needing a clean, but overall it was a nice place which, at the time of writing, I feel it would have been nice to stay in for a few more days.

Given my connections I have spoken to a few people about an idea I have had for a film, which I would like to call Silk Road, or in Kazakh, Zhibek Zholy. I won't spill any beans, but in a sense this represents a lot of the reasons I have lived the last ten years as I have. No surprises that the story is to be based on my life, to an extent, but not entirely and we all need to take inspiration from somewhere.

Yet as I write now, I also feel compelled to point out that I have this very day started to consider not writing it as a screenplay but as a novel. If I ever manage to decide what I want, I'll let you know.

In a way I chose the wrong week to leave Kazakhstan, what with all the Olympic fever gripping the city. OK, slight exaggeration, but people are clearly very proud of their country here and therefore proud when their country does well. And their/our country has done well. If I may clarify, I am not referring to Great Britain, which obviously stands out as nation of the games, not simply by having hosted them, but with some 30 odd gold medals credit simply has to go where it's due, they have performed fantastically well and deserve every ounce of the gold that's gone round their necks.

Trouble is, I don't really know who won what (apart from Bradley Wiggins, bless him), instead, the mainstay of my attention has gone on the sackful of golds heading this way across the Eurasian continental land mass to be greeted by President Nazarbayev and a pile of cash for being jolly good at what they do. The country's target was two gold medals, one I expect to be provided by the judoka Maxim Rakov, who sadly and amazingly lost in Round 1. The other participants, it was expected, would pick up minor medals and put the country in a good light. Then there was the unexpected... I say this, maybe it was expected, maybe seven golds was precisely what the country had in mind. They'll certainly do. It could have been ten, a few close calls and as I said, Maxim, who was nailed on favourite for gold, but what Kazakhstan has achieved is every bit equal to that of Team GB, in real terms. Let's hope it is just a beginning.